

The Role of Research in Building a Character

by

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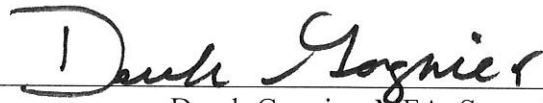
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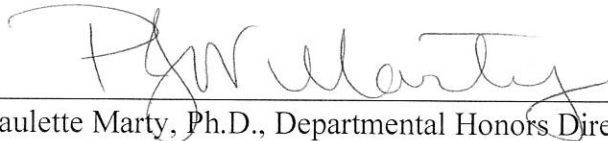
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The Role of Research in Building a Character

“Actors who play a role they have not studied well and thoroughly analyzed are like readers of a complicated, unfamiliar text. Such actors have only a dim perspective of the play. They do not understand where they must lead the characters they play” stated Constantin Stanislavsky, a Russian theatre practitioner and actor who is most commonly known for his Method acting (Stanislavsky, *Building a Character*, 171). Many beginning actors are given a script and never told what to do with it. They memorize their lines, write down their blocking, and then put on a costume and portray a character. However, this character becomes very two dimensional and unrealistic. It is the job of an actor to build a character that imitates real life, is fully fleshed out, and fits into the world of the play. And in order to do this, an actor has to do research. This research should be gathered in order to inform the actor’s knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the play and ultimately lead to a specific choice that the actor makes. As actor and professor Derek Gagnier said, “No research is helpful unless it makes you want to do something” (Gagnier). The research that an actor does affects the way they interact with other characters, places, and ideas. It affects their reactions to events and circumstances. It informs their decisions on the character’s social constructs. Actor Adrian Rieder states:

In order to have a better grasp of the historical context of the play, the cultural context of the play, it’s my job to have a very specific opinion about everything that happens in this play. That’s a big part of being present in the moment. Just as in life, we constantly have

an opinion about what's going on and in order to react authentically and spontaneously in the moment in a play you have to know exactly how you feel about everything. So how do you make those choices? You make the choices based on researching the context of the world so you can recognize that your characters opinions about sex or marriage or family or money or God or religion are different than yours. (Rieder)

As an actor begins the process of preparing for a role, research is vital not only to their successful portrayal of the character but also to the believability of the world of the play. "No one in the audience sees the research, they see people with bigger worlds than others" (Gagnier). It is the goal of an actor to have the biggest world that they possibly can and the only way to do that is by doing the research.

Throughout this thesis, I am going to reference a production that I was a part of my junior year of college at Appalachian State University entitled *Silence* by Moira Buffini and the research I did to better understand the world of the play and my character. This play is set in the year 1002 AD in Medieval England and takes place in many different locations. The play is a fictional story based around two real people from history, Ymma of Normandy and King Ethelred. My character, Agnes, is a servant to Ymma and spends most of her life suffering for Ymma's actions.

Research can be conducted through many different forms such as books, online databases, scholarly journals, interviews, well researched television shows and movies, and traveling to the setting of the play. Text-based research has many benefits because it can encompass just about anything. There are billions of resources so an actor is likely to find beneficial information. Interviews can be beneficial because an actor has the ability to ask specific questions relating to the play and can get personal experiences that would help them to

build a character. Movies and television shows can often provide information about the way of life in a certain place or time; however, an actor has to be sure that the information that is being portrayed is accurate. One of the best ways to conduct research for a role is by travelling to the place where the action is set and seeing first-hand what that world is like. Actor Oliver Ford Davies who played the role of Darwin in *Darwin in Malibu* by Crispin Whittell states that when he was conducting his research “the greatest help was a visit to Down House, where he had lived for the last 40 years of his life. His study had been kept exactly as he left it, full of the instruments of his research... to be able to visualize such a detail was worth hours of reading” (Cantrell, Luckhurst 64).

I was also able to experience the benefits of traveling to the setting of a play, as we traveled to England to conduct research for *Silence*. We were able to visit sites that were mentioned in the play as well museums that had artifacts from the medieval Anglo-Saxon/Viking era. One of the most beneficial experiences for me was going to visit a barrow, which is an ancient form of tomb. There’s a scene in the play where we all had to take shelter in a barrow for the night which was a very scary moment for my character. If you’ve ever seen pictures of a barrow, it doesn’t seem to be scary. There are open fields and then a mound of rocks with an entrance, but when I actually stood inside of the Long Barrow in Avebury, it was eerie and unsettling. All I could hear was the wind blowing, it was pitch black inside, and I was all too aware of the fact that I was standing on a burial ground. This experience directly affected my choices when rehearsing this scene in *Silence*. My experience gave me something to interact with and visualize. I was able to transfer the fear that I felt in the barrow to rehearsals, which raised the stakes for my character. While in England, I was also able to go to the town of York and walk along the city walls, which is something my character did in the play. I felt this sense of

power as I was standing there looking over an entire city, which is something I wouldn't have been able to gather from looking at a picture. We visited a chapel from around the time period of the play as well, which was another one of the settings in the play. It was cold and damp inside, but still peaceful and quiet. These experiences gave me actual memories to draw from when rehearsing instead of relying on secondary research such as books and images. Having the opportunity to travel to England helped me advance my research and develop my character.

Unfortunately, actors do not usually have the opportunity to visit the setting of a play; however, there are other approaches to research that every actor can use. All of these begin with reading and analyzing the script. The script itself is filled with so much information that will help them build the world of the play, but they will also find gaps in the storyline and missing information. Without that knowledge, the character is not complete and neither is the world in which they are living. And so begins the process of researching.

After reading the play, an actor can begin their research by developing a list of facts. In her book, *The Director's Craft*, director Katie Mitchell describes facts as “the non-negotiable elements of the text” and “the main clues that the writer provides about the play” (Mitchell 11). It is important to write down every piece of information that is presented in the play text, as it can further inform an actor's knowledge of the world of the play and their character. Stanislavsky states “You can discover and make a note of whatever the playwright tells you about the scene, setting, position of rooms, architecture, lighting, grouping, gestures, manners” (Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 18).

An actor should then determine which facts need further study. So, for example, a fact is that the play is set in Medieval England. What does the actor know about Medieval England? Do they already have the resources they need or do they need to do more research? Stanislavsky says

“...the circumstances which make up a way of life must be studied not only in the actual text but also in a variety of commentaries, pieces of literature, historical writings concerning the period, and so forth” (Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 17). The text provides a strong foundation on which to begin, but it is up to the actor to expand that into a much larger realm of resources in order to accurately portray a character in the world of the play. Actor and professor Derek Davidson discusses some of the research he did to prepare for his role in *Fiddler on the Roof* by saying, “I read the stories of Sholem Aleichem where the play originates, I studied the early twentieth century in Russia, I studied Judaism, I studied the tradition of bottle dance, I studied music, Kelzmer music, I studied the style, really I immersed myself within that show” (Davidson).

When I first read *Silence*, I knew very little about Medieval England; however, I couldn’t just research the broad topic of Medieval England, as that would take up too much of my time and cause me to gather information that is irrelevant to the plot of the play. I had to ask specific questions about information that the text left unclear, which would ultimately help me to accurately portray my character in the world of the play. Katie Mitchell defines questions as “a way of notating the areas of the text that are less clear or that you are simply not sure of.” (Mitchell 11). During our preparation for *Silence*, we created a list of questions that stemmed from the facts we determined that needed further study. Below is an example of some of the questions we asked.

Conflict between Vikings and Anglo Saxons	Christian beliefs in 1000 CE England (sexuality, marriage, confession)	Cumbria
What were Viking Raids like?	What behaviors and statements would have been considered blasphemous?	What is a bog? Is Cumbria bog-like?

How did the battle tactics, fighting styles, and killing practices of Vikings and Anglo Saxons differ?	What were the church's positions on sexual activity and sexual orientation? How much did they actually care about people's sexual practices? Did they really suggest to couples how often and when they should have sex?	Where is Cumbria? What is the landscape like? How large a region is it and would the "Lord of Cumbria" have ruled it all?
Did soldiers oil their torsos? If so, what kind of oil and for what reason?	Is Roger's description on p. 222 an accurate reflection of how the church viewed women?	How much control did the King really have over Cumbria?
Did the Anglo Saxons literally consider the Vikings a "demon race?"	What was the role of confession in Christian belief? What was the confession process like?	Did Ethelred really attack a castle in Cumbria (Ragnarok or otherwise?)
What happened in the 994 Viking siege of London?	Would marrying Ymma to a heathen be considered a punishment? Why?	Who was the Lord of Cumbria? How much power did he have?
Was rape a common practice in Viking raids? Of both sexes?	Would being pagan make your Christian marriage void?	What would happen in Cumbria if the lord didn't have a male heir?
Did people actually eat psychedelic mushrooms before battle?	To whom would a woman confess?	When and how did Vikings settle in Cumbria?
What forms of torture were used by both sides?	How and under what conditions could a marriage be annulled?	What were the people of Cumbria like? How many cultures lived there? Did they intermingle?
What happened at the siege of York?	What likely would have happened to Silence had the marriage been annulled?	How did people in Cumbria live (e.g. did they sleep with their pigs)?
How did the Vikings use rivers for their raids? Were their raids concentrated on rivers?	What behaviors and statements have been considered blasphemous?	What were Cumbrian castles like?
Why did the Vikings attack their own people in England?		Who would have run Cumbria until Silence was old enough?
What were Viking Raids like?		What is a bog? Is Cumbria bog-like?
How did the battle tactics, fighting styles, and killing practices of Vikings and Anglo Saxons differ?		Where is Cumbria? What is the landscape like? How large a region is it and would the "Lord of Cumbria" have ruled it all?

So, for example, a fact that needs further study is that in Medieval England, there was conflict between the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, and a question that falls beneath that is how did the battle tactics differ between the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons. After researching this, I learned that Vikings would often raid towns unprovoked, killing inhabitants, raping women and stealing cattle, money, and food. They would burn down settlements leaving a trail of destruction and sometimes even cut up their victims as a sacrifice to the gods. Knowing this information

informed my choices in rehearsals because I knew the stakes of being caught by the Vikings which allowed me to feel the fear that someone traveling across the open road in Viking inhabited England would feel. It gave me something to think about when I was on stage without any lines as the characters traveled across the country in an open cart. It gave me visualizations of what a town would look like that was raided by the Vikings. My thought process changed in rehearsals from “I’m supposed to be scared of the Vikings” to “I’m terrified of the Vikings because they will see me sitting here on this cart, rape me and then kill me for absolutely no reason at all and I have no chance of escape”. A list of questions becomes the base of the research for an actor as they start to understand the world of the play in which they are living. It is always helpful to organize these questions into categories, as we did in *Silence*, in order to conduct the research in a more time efficient manner.

In addition to identifying and understanding the facts of the play’s world, an actor must also identify and understand the play’s theme and style. Research is also helpful to this process. The theme or main idea of the play allows the actor to determine what the play means to them which provides a different lens through which to view and conduct research. In order to determine the theme an actor should ask ‘what is the central metaphor of the play?’. When we started the rehearsal process for *Silence*, our director, Paulette Marty, shared with us a metaphor she had created for the play, which was “Silence is a careening journey towards agency or oblivion”. In order to form this metaphor, she had to conduct research on the concept of autonomy and agency as well as what would have happened to people in Medieval England had they disobeyed their King or tried to shift their social position in some way. As an actor, this led me to research how a servant would have gotten out of servitude and if that was even possible. In my research, I found that it was near impossible for a servant to escape servitude and if they did,

they could face consequences such as death especially if they were indebted to a Lord. Agnes eventually does escape the life of a servant and, due to my research, I understood the huge risk she took in doing so, which in turn showed me how high the stakes needed to be in her decision making.

Style refers to the manner in which a play presents its story, plot, and theme. It is usually classified according to the way that reality is portrayed on stage (Felner 154). For example, is the play realistic or non-realistic? Knowing this information plays a huge role in the way that an actor conducts their research. If an actor is doing a realistic play, there will be more concrete information presented such as a particular time and place whereas a non-realistic play might be more abstract and left up to the director's interpretation, such as the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett which has no specific time or place. This isn't the case with every nonrealistic play though. Some might have fantastical elements but still exist in a historical time and place. In either scenario, research is very important for the actor. A play with a historical setting will have more information readily available for research whereas a nonrealistic play will require more dependence on the script and research on the time period of the playwright. Every play, regardless of the period it is set in, has elements of the period in which it was written. For example, *Silence* was set in the middle ages but used contemporary language which connected it to the lack of agency that we still face today. This required me to be educated not only on Medieval England, but also on current events that are happening today. *Silence* discusses the idea that women in this time didn't have control over their own lives, so I needed to look at our society in the twenty-first century and study the role of women in what is still a male dominated society. Congress has a majority of men, we've never had a female president and, unfortunately, many people are angered at just the idea of it. These correlations to the world we're living in

today allowed me to not only find ways to connect to my character, but also connect with my audience. Derek Davidson states, “When I did *Twelfth Night*, I was Feste the clown and the director decided that Feste would be like Shakespeare. So I wasn’t just looking at the period of the play, I was also looking at the period of Shakespeare” (Davidson).

One aspect of the play that nearly always requires further research is the given circumstances. This requires the actor to ask the questions: Who am I? Where am I? What is happening? And when is it happening? Stanislavsky states that “the purpose of analysis should be to study in detail and prepare given circumstances for a play or part so that through them, later on in the creative process, the actors emotions will instinctively be sincere and his feeling true to life” (Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 9). An actor can begin studying the given circumstances by looking at the ‘*where*’. *Where* describes the physical and social conditions in which the character lives. It sets the scene and actively interacts with the *who* and *what* of the given circumstances (Felner 109).

People radically alter their conduct and demeanor depending on where they are (Felner 109). An actor should ask themselves, am I inside or outside? What room am I in and how is it furnished? What is considered acceptable behavior where I am? Where have I just come from and how does that influence how I act? How do I physically interact with the place I’m in? After an actor has asked themselves these questions, they should research not only the physical elements of the environment, but also how the environment would influence their character’s behavior. This means actors can better understand their character’s behavior by doing research on topics as general as the culture of the country in which the play is set or as specific as the room where the action takes place. For example, in *Silence*, there is a wedding scene that takes place in the king’s castle. As an actor, it is important for me to ask myself what would be

acceptable behavior in a place of such royalty, especially considering my character's low social status. I learned that I would likely not speak unless spoken to which helped me in rehearsals because I knew that my character would be nervous and out of her element in this place. I also had to do visual research to understand what a castle would have looked like during this time, meaning I looked at pictures online and in books. *Silence* consists of 27 different scenes that take place in various different locations such as a chapel, the King's bedchamber, a barn, a barrow, a castle, etc. We only had one stationary set, so before we rehearsed each scene our director had us walk through the space on stage and visualize everything, from where the windows would be to the what the ceiling would look like. My visual research allowed me to create a more accurate image of where I was in each scene and it gave me something to interact with in each scene – whether that be a cool breeze through a window or the never-ending open fields as we traveled through England.

When actors are studying the *where* of the given circumstances, they should also research the culture of the country where the play is set. Different cultures have distinctive characteristics that affect their behaviors. For example, researching whether a country would be identified as having an individualistic culture or collectivist culture gives clues about how the character would interact with others and behave in certain situations. Collectivists emphasize family and have stronger attachments to groups whereas individualists attempt to change groups more often and dislike conformity. The United States is an example of an individualistic culture, whereas China is an example of a collectivist culture. Knowing where the action of the play takes place and researching cultural behaviors of that place helps an actor determine how their character would interact with others and the physical space where the action takes place.

As an actor begins to study the *when* of the given circumstances, they develop a special sensitivity to time and become aware of just how strongly it affects all aspects of life. “When researching the era, decade, and year in which a play is set, you enter the wondrous worlds of history, geography, science, music, literature, art, politics, social systems, religion, and business” (Bartow 131). *When* includes both the historical time period and time as it is experienced by the individual, such as time of day, the year, and the season. For example, in *Silence*, the action of the play was set in November. This required me to do research on what the weather is like in England in November. I learned that it would be cold, it would rain often, and possibly snow. It is also important to know the time of day when the scene takes place. So, what would an average day look like for a person during this time? Are they awake at 5am and asleep by 9pm? We decided that the first scene in *Silence* would take place around 6pm which means it is beginning to get dark and it’s close to the time I should be going to sleep. It is also November, so it is cold outside and we’ve been traveling all day. This has a huge effect on my physical presence on stage because it gives me something to play – I’m cold, exhausted, and worn out from traveling.

An actor should also look at time from a historical standpoint. Historical time determines what a character would wear, how they express themselves, their vocabulary, attitudes toward sex and courtship, their relationships, what they have been doing up to this moment, what they are doing in the immediate present, and their future plans. Social customs and manners are constantly changing and influencing the way of thinking and even fashion changes alter the way we move and act. For example, in *Silence*, there is a scene that includes homosexual contact, so it is important that the actors know how people responded to that in 1002 AD England. By researching this, we learned that homosexuality was intolerable and considered sinful and had harsh punishments such as castration and even execution. There is also mention of rape in

Silence which people responded to very differently in Medieval times as well. For instance, a man convicted of rape was not punished as severely as he would be for other crimes and was often just charged a fee. However, the woman who was raped was seen as damaged and would commonly be left by her husband or even killed. This information is incredibly important for the actors to know when these topics arise in the play because it creates stakes for the actor that otherwise wouldn't have been known. Even something as simple as fashion trends over time can affect behavior and the way we move. In *Silence*, there is a scene where Ymma puts on men's clothing and her whole dynamic changes. During this time women were required to wear corsets and long dresses that covered most of their body. These fashion trends restricted movement and required them to have good posture. When Ymma changed into men's clothing, she walked freely, slouched, and was able to break away from the constructs of how women should behave in that time period. Anytime an actor is working on a show where the historical time differs from their own, it is crucial that they not only research the history of the time period, but also how it would affect the way that their character thinks, moves and acts accordingly (Felner 113).

After studying the *when* and *where* of the given circumstances, an actor can move onto the *what* – the dramatic circumstances under which an actor must operate that determines their objective. These circumstances include what has happened up to the moment of the character's stage life and what is happening as the play begins. An actor should make a list of events that happen to their character in the play and, using the given circumstances discussed earlier, begin brainstorming how their character might respond to these events. In *Silence*, there was an event where the characters all accidentally got high on mushrooms. This required me as an actor to do research on the effects of mushrooms and how it would change my behavior. Colors become more vibrant, details pop out, and you lose sense of physical boundaries. This information gave

me ideas to play with during rehearsal that were accurate to a mushroom high but also emphasized the comedy of the scene.

An actor should also determine events that happened in their character's life before the play begins based on clues provided in the text. They should then research how these events would have affected their past and consequently, their present. For example, in *Silence*, it is noted that Agnes was raised in a convent. This required me to conduct research on what life would have been like for a servant growing up in a convent so that I could understand a large portion of my character's past. Through this research, I learned that convents actually provided limited education to servants, which was surprising because it was very rare for servants to have any education at all during this time. This affected my decisions in rehearsals, such as my delivery of lines, because I knew that I had almost the same amount of education as the other characters who were of a higher social status than me which, for instance, made me comfortable speaking my mind to Ymma in places that most servants of this time period would not. Another example comes from actor Henry Goodman who played an 82-year-old Sigmund Freud. He said that "by reading around the cases that came to Freud as a young doctor in his twenties, I was able to find the inspiration to play him as an old man. I was fascinated by his great intellectual gift, of course, but also by the notion that he must have carried a profound guilt for years and years about his sisters' terrible fate" (Cantrell, Luckhurst 75). The *what* of the given circumstances requires research on the events that happened to the character during the play and before the start of the play, as well as in between scenes where events take place that aren't already shown in the play (Mitchell 33).

Actors might find it beneficial to create a timeline by writing down the events they listed in the character's past that they determined from the play's text, and then putting those events in

chronological order. This becomes a lot easier if the character is based on a real person, however, if the character is fictional, the actor will often have to make up information that is consistent to the time period and place in which the play is set, so that they can understand their character's backstory. The text will provide very little straightforward information about dates and time scales, except things like ages. There might be some mention of actual dates, but this is rare. Most of the timeline will be informed by an actor's research, in order to make sure that it is historically accurate. An actor can also add things to their timeline that they find in their research that is not informed by the script if they feel that it advances their character (Mitchell 24). Even if it is a small role, make some simple decisions. Here's an example of the timeline I created for my character, Agnes, in *Silence*:

980 AD: Born Agnes Gardinier on September 23rd and left at the Convent of Normandy where she is to be raised by nuns.

980 AD: Baptized as an infant at the convent.

983 AD: Given to the Reverend Mother to be her personal servant until she could be sold to a wealthy family.

984 AD: Started learning basic duties of a servant, such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing.

985AD: Began very limited reading and writing lessons (convents and nunneries provided the only source of education for women during the middle ages).

986 AD: Began Catechism classes (won a prize for her knowledge in the class). Religion became a comfort to Agnes, as it's something she is good at and something that is very important to her; however, she also begins to fear disobeying God's Word and the resulting consequence of damnation.

986 AD: Received first Book of Hours which is the main prayer book (divided into eight sections, or hours, that were meant to be read at specific times of the day in the convent).

987 AD: Attended first confession.

987 AD: Catches an autumn leaf and is told by the Reverend Mother that it is lucky.

988 AD: Taught by Reverend Mother about different herbs and their medicinal value.

The herbs bring a sense of comfort to her, as it distracts her from her daily duties as a servant.

988 AD: Attended confirmation and became a full member of the Catholic Church.

989 AD: Participated in first Holy Communion.

989 AD: Had a sex dream (scared of the consequences of her dream, but doesn't confess).

990 AD: Told by the Abbess that angelic singing could only be heard by humans in their dreams and all human music was an attempt to remember its beauty. Music becomes a comfort to Agnes, as it reminds her of God.

990 AD: Ymma's mother (Gunnora) buys Agnes as a maid for Ymma from the convent. Their relationship is tense from the beginning.

995 AD: First time experiencing one of Ymma's "tantrums", really scares Agnes.

996 AD: Ymma's mom dies and Agnes witnesses a severe change in Ymma's behavior.

998 AD: Ymma throws another "tantrum" leading to tense relations between her and the Duke, and further straining Agnes and Ymma's relationship.

1001 AD: Agnes develops bedchamber skills.

1002 AD: Ymma attacks her brother with a knife. Agnes realizes the effect that Ymma's actions have on her life.

1002 AD: Ymma and Agnes are cast out of Normandy by her brother. They leave via ship for Canterbury (3-4 weeks before present).

1002 AD: Ymma and Agnes land at a harbor in Dover. They travel for two days from Dover to Canterbury, stopping at appropriate places to pray.

When creating this timeline, I used research in many different ways to inform my character's background. For example, the script told me that she grew up in a convent and she's from Normandy, so I researched medieval convents in Normandy, and there just so happened to be a Convent of Normandy. I then had to research what it would have been like to grow up in a convent during this time period which led me to discover that catechism classes would usually begin around age six and that they then received a Book of Hours. I didn't know anything about the Book of Hours, but it was a very important book in Medieval Christianity so I further researched its purpose and learned that it was the main prayer book and it was divided into sections that were meant to be read at specific times of the day in the convent. Being a servant in this time period, this would have likely been one of Agnes' only possessions and would have held a great deal of meaning to her. Doing this additional research helped me learn just how important religion was in her childhood and allowed me to create memories I could draw on for her during the action of the play. Some actors also find it helpful to convert their timeline into a narrative biography, as it allows them to think as their character.

Next an actor moves on to the *who* of the given circumstances and begins the search for their character's identity and an understanding of their relationship to the other characters on stage. *Who* they are is a result of the confluence of circumstances that have shaped the character's life. To determine who they are, an actor must ask a series of questions including how old am I? What do I look like physically – height, weight, attractiveness? How am I

dressed? What is my occupation? What are my sexual tendencies? What is my social, familial, and political status? What was my childhood like? How do I feel about myself? What are my ambitions? My secret desires and fears? (Felner 114). Most of the answers to these questions will come from clues in the text, however, some will require additional research in order to create a character that is historically accurate. For example, the text may say that my character is a servant, but what does that entail and how does it affect the character's life? After conducting research on the lower class in Medieval England, I learned that servants owned nothing and were not allowed to leave the manor or even get married without their master's permission. Most of the lower class were peasants who were pledged to their local lord. They worked the fields, cared for livestock, built and maintained the buildings, made the clothing, and often slept outside with the livestock. Agnes was fortunate in that she was sold to an aristocratic family where her duties consisted more of sewing, cleaning, and tending to Ymma's needs. This information helped me to understand how I would behave when interacting with characters of a different social status and served as a constant reminder that, although I was already at the bottom of the hierarchy, things could still be worse, so my behavior had to reflect that.

It can also be helpful to make a list containing everything the character says about themselves and then turn those quotes into a series of nouns and adjectives that can be added to the sentence 'I am...' (Mitchell 69). It is important to understand a character's feelings about themselves in order to step inside this person's life and view the world from their eyes. Mitchell goes on to say that it is also worth finding out what the character thinks about other characters. She says to write down everything that the character says about each of the other characters and then add them to the sentences 'character x is...'. This is important because often times the way we view ourselves is in direct relation to the way we view others. It also forces the actors to

make a choice about their relationships with other characters that they can draw on in rehearsals. We created a list of adjectives in the beginning rehearsal process for *Silence* and it really helped me to develop my character by providing a basis for how I felt about myself. We were given a few minutes to write down as many adjectives as we could that described our individual characters and then we had to choose the three that we felt best defined our character. As this was a small cast of only six characters, we all interacted with each other at some point, so we also wrote down three adjectives for all of the other characters (from our individual character's perspective, of course). Here's what I wrote in my acting journal:

I am: faithful, compliant, powerless

Ymma is: demanding, disrespectful, misunderstood

Silence is: strange, friendly, benevolent

Roger is: spiritual, charming, compassionate

Ethelred is: frightening, powerful, ruthless

Eadric is: strong, intimidating, threatening

After using the knowledge of the script to determine the adjectives that best define the character, an actor needs to look at those words and decide what needs further research. So, if one of the words is faithful, an actor needs to ask what faith or religion does the character practice? If the answer is Christianity, then how does Anglo-Saxon Christianity in 1002 AD differ from the Christianity that is practiced in the U.S. today? Through my research, I learned that in 1002 AD, damnation was viewed in a much more serious manner. People believed that sins such as vanity, gluttony, secularism, and even sexual activity would lure the devil to them. Although the devil is still very real in modern Christianity, the consequences for sins are not feared in the same way as they once were. They believed in a purgatory where they would atone for their sins and that they

could undertake deeds that would speed them along in this process. Since my character was very religious, this information helped me to understand that she would have lived with this constant fear of damnation and desire to do good deeds. During rehearsals, I was able to use this research to inform my choices, such as when Ymma throws up in the baptismal font of a church in scene one. Instead of simply being angry at her for making a mess that I had to clean up, I was able to use this research to play the fear that she would have experienced because Ymma blasphemed by desecrating a sacred object and could possibly doom their journey.

Characters are also evolving and shifting throughout the action of the play, so it is also worth noting distinctive changes in attitude on the part of the character throughout the play (Kahan, Rugg 183). An actor should always question why a character displays a change, what the alternate options were, and what made this path the right choice. This information might be provided in the text or it might require an actor to search for additional resources. For example, if a woman's husband dies, that's obviously going to cause a change in attitude, but the consequences of that are going to differ based on the time period of the play. If the play is set in the 1700s, it was rare for a woman to have much legal existence apart from her husband. A widow would often be left with no belongings and no way of making money so she was forced to remarry; however, in present day a widow is still able to remain single and support herself. Knowing this would create more layers to the initial grief that the character experienced during the change in attitude.

An actor also uses research to further examine the given circumstances surrounding their relationships. They should always ask themselves, "how do I stand in relationship to the circumstances, the place, the objects, and the other people related to my circumstances?" (Bartow 133). Becoming conscious of how the character stands in relationship to the

circumstances, places, and people they interact with helps an actor to make specific choices for the situations they are faced with in the play. Derek Gagnier explains, “What you have to do is take the history and subjectify it. So, you have to have a relationship with the facts because given circumstances in a play all need to be connected up to the actor or they don’t do anything” (Gagnier). Understanding these relationships increases an actor’s sensory and emotional connection to every object they handle and helps them to become more honest and personal in their relationships with other characters. An actor begins to analyze their character’s relationships from the facts that the playwright provides through the stage directions and dialogue. They can start by describing the *generic* and *specific relationship* between their character and the other characters with whom they interact. The *generic relationship* includes the type of relationship and its general circumstances. For example, mother and son, husband and wife, servant and master etc. In each case, the character’s social positions further detail the relationship. The *specific relationship* looks at how the details of the relationship change over time and where the relationship is at the start of each scene. Details that affect the specific relationship include place and subject matter. The relationship a person has with the place they are in will affect the way that they interact with the other characters. It is also important to look at the subject matter, as each relationship changes depending on what has just happened before the scene, and then the subject matter of the scene further changes the relationship (Knopf 114). For example, the subject matter of the first scene in *Silence* changes the relationship from the general description ‘servant and master’ to ‘servant in a new home where my fate rests on the actions of my master [Ymma]’. In order to come to this statement, I had to conduct research on what the relationship would have been like between a servant and master during this time. I discovered that a servant could actually be held accountable for their master’s actions which is a

fear that Agnes would have considering Ymma's fierce personality and carelessness. This puts a tension on our relationship which directly affects the way I interact with her in rehearsals. I was able to display not only my frustration with but also the fear of what could happen as we entered this new place.

Actors should also use research to determine how relationships would differ based on the time period and geographical location of the play. For example, a married couple would have a very different relationship in the Middle Ages than in present day. When an actor goes beyond the text to conduct research on marriages in the Middle Ages, they learn that women didn't have a choice as to who they married and they usually never knew each other before the wedding. Marriages were political arrangements and weren't based on love which would affect the way a married couple would interact on stage. In present day, couples usually have a long past and a story about how they fell in love. In the Middle Ages, it was rare for a couple to be in love and even if they were, it would have happened after their marriage. This also brings up views on divorce which was near impossible in Middle ages. People were often unhappy in marriages but they had to stay together for political reasons whereas now divorce is extremely common. An actor should use this research to ask themselves "how does this inform the way I interact with my partner?" For example, a woman in unhappy relationship in this time might be desensitized to her husband but is still obedient to him. This allows the actor to build a more complex relationship with those they interact with and increases the significance of their actions throughout the play.

An actor's research on factors such as social class, education, religion, political leaning, family life, etc. also influences their character's interaction with others throughout the play. For instance, it's important to research the social class of the character because people in different

classes often communicate differently with each other. As a servant in *Silence*, I had to know my place in comparison to other characters and how to interact with them. Ymma would be considered nobility so I was supposed to treat her with respect and follow her orders; however, Ethelred is royalty so I wasn't even permitted to speak to him. In scene 25, I talked to the King without first being addressed and because of this research, I know how severe the consequences could be and how high the stakes have to be for me to address him.

To further examine their relationships, an actor should ask questions including, am I afraid of them, or them of me? Is the relationship open or hidden? Do I look up to them or down? Is the relationship reciprocal or are we at opposites? (Hagen 166). An actor's answers to these questions will be dependent on the research they have conducted on their given circumstances. For example, relationships could be concealed based on social class, race, or gender. This requires an actor to do research on how society felt about these topics during the time period of the play. An actor might ask, are interracial romantic relationships acceptable in this time? If the answer is no, then what are the consequences if the characters are caught? This knowledge is going to put a lot of tension on the relationship and cause them to act in a different way than someone would in an interracial relationship today. Relationships could also be feared based on power and wealth. In *Silence*, my character's encounters with the king are terrifying because, based on my research, I know that he has the power to end my life if he chooses. It is important for an actor to understand where their character stands in perspective to other characters.

An actor can also use improvisations to further their knowledge and understanding of their character, and they should use their research to shape their improvisations. "Improvisation can trigger the personalization process, develop objectives, inspire action, and aid in the discovery of character" (Felner 216). Through improvisation an actor is given the ability to use

their own words using the given circumstances of the scene to deepen their identification with the role. The improvisations an actor does should reconstruct the events that take place before the start of the play and thereby lodge a lasting concrete picture of what happened in their mind- almost as if it were an actual memory. Improvisations can also be used for the action that occurs in between scenes to fuel subsequent scenes.

In order to keep an improvisation focused on the main goal, it needs to be structured well, and in order for it to be structured well, an actor has to have done their research on the circumstances surrounding the improvisation. An actor's earlier research may not have included information about events before the start of the play and the events in between each scene. An actor will need to be knowledgeable on these circumstances in order for the improvisations to be done successfully in a way that will benefit the actor. When structuring an improvisation, an actor should first determine the event that they will be improvising. This event should be something that plays a significant role in the character's life that might only be briefly mentioned in the script. An actor should then research the place where the event happens. Actors might be able to draw on their previous research when preparing for an improvisation, but if it takes place before the start of the play or in between scenes, it could be in a completely different setting than the action of the play. It is just as important for an actor to know this information, even though it isn't explicitly in the text, because it is still a significant part of the character's life. After researching the place for the improvisation, an actor should move on to the time period. This includes the time of day, season and year; however, it also requires an actor to ask if any major events have happened between the action of the improvisation and the action of the play that would affect the historical time period. For example, maybe the improvisation takes place before the start of the play under the reign of a different ruler, or during the character's childhood when

the country was at war. A character's calm and easy-going attitude in the action of the play could be completely different than the fear they experienced everyday as a child while their country was at war. If an actor is doing an improvisation during this character's childhood and hasn't done the research to determine what was happening during the time period of the improvisation, then they could end up making choices that wouldn't be representative of their character, and therefore wouldn't help them support what the character says and does in the action of the play.

Once an actor has conducted the initial research for the improvisation, they can begin to determine the immediate circumstances for the improvisation. This requires an actor to ask, "what just happened?" The text won't provide all of the details for the immediate circumstances, so the actor will have to create their own circumstances surrounding the event. Using the research done earlier on the time period and place, as well as what they know about the character, the actor can determine appropriate circumstances that are consistent with the time period and character that lead to the main event of the improvisation. An actor should also determine the character's first intention before the event. This is similar to the character objective – what do they want going into this event? The actor will determine this based on the research they have done regarding this specific improvisation and the immediate circumstances they created. Then the actor should determine the character's second intention, which occurs after the event – so how does the objective change after the event happens? Once the actor has structured the improvisation, using their research to fill in the blanks, they can begin acting out the improvisation. When actors aren't worried about their lines, they can often find new connections to their roles. "The aim of improvisation is to build pictures of the past that will support what the characters do and say in the present action of the play" (Mitchell 72). These pictures help to determine relationships and how the character talks about the past.

An actor can also use visualizations to help them discover a moment in their character's past. "Visualizations are another way of creating pictures of past events to support the action of the play... and are particularly useful for past events that happen to one character alone."

(Mitchell 165) A visualization is set up the same way as an improvisation, but it allows the actor to make these discoveries on their own time just by writing down the information and then closing their eyes and visualizing it, rather than actually improvising it.

During the rehearsal process for *Silence*, we structured both our improvisations and visualizations in this format. Below is an example of a visualization that I did on my own time to help me discover more about my character's past. The script mentions that Agnes is very knowledgeable about medicine and herbs which was something I felt that I needed to learn more about since I don't really know much about herbs.

Place: The Convent of Normandy

Date and Time: May 12th 988 AD

Immediate circumstances: Three days ago, Reverend Mother began teaching me the uses of different medicinal herbs. She took me outside to the forest not too far from the convent and showed me how to cut the plants and where to store them. I learned about the illnesses that each herb can heal and how to make them into poultices and drinks.

Reverend Mother said I'm doing a great job. I quite enjoy learning about herbs, although I'm not very good at it yet. It's definitely better than my normal duties which include cooking, cleaning, and anything else that Reverend Mother asks me to do. Today I decided to go out looking for herbs for the first time on my own.

Your first intention: I want to find all the herbs that Reverend Mother taught me so that I can take them back to her and make her proud. I start looking for lavender and sage to cure headaches and wormwood for stomach aches.

The event: While I'm searching for herbs, I hear someone behind me and as I turn around, I step on a thorn and fall. Reverend Mother comes up behind me and helps me up. She pulls out the thorn and tells me to find the right herb to treat wounds.

Your intention after the event: I want to successfully heal someone for my first time. After scanning the ground, I see a mint plant and use it to treat the wound and prevent infection.

When preparing for this improvisation, I found that I needed to do research in each step of the process to really be able to visualize what that world would have been like. I started out with *place* which required me to do research on The Convent of Normandy and what my living conditions would have been like there. Then I moved on to *date and time* which led me to research what Normandy would have been like during this time, where I learned that at this point, Normandy would have still been under the rule of Ymma's father. Moving on to my *immediate circumstances*, I needed to know who would have taught me about herbs, which I discovered would have been the Reverend Mother. This led me to research what the Reverend Mother's role was in the convent and what my relationship would have been with her. When determining my *first and second intentions*, I had to do additional research to discover different herbs and what they were used for. By structuring it the way I did, I could see a clear visualization of this in my head which created a memory for me to draw on and allowed me to learn more about the herbs that my character would have studied.

An actor should take all of the research that they have accumulated – from the initial questions they had after reading the script to the given circumstances, relationships, and improvisations – and write out the information as it applies to every scene, so that they have a clear idea of what each scene looks like and their character's mindset going into the scene. For every scene, an actor should document the time, place, immediate circumstances, events, intentions, past events, future pictures, self-feelings, and relationships.

We set up each scene in this format for *Silence*, which helped me to quickly remember the circumstances, determine the stakes, and get in the moment of the scene. Some of this information was written directly on my script, while some of it I kept in my journal. Below is an example from my journal of my scene preparation for the first scene in *Silence*.

Time- November 1002 AD, 5:00 or 6:00 PM, getting dark

Place- A field in Kent

Immediate circumstances- Ymma just threw up in the font and it's set us way behind. I'm eager to get there because I'm scared of the Viking raids at night.

Events- (in script)

Intentions- (in script)

Past events- Ymma and I land in Dover, we are greeted by the King's men and begin the journey to Canterbury, Ymma throws up in the font, Ymma argues with the King's men

Future pictures- If Ymma doesn't cooperate, we're both going to die

Self-feelings- Powerless, tired, scared of Vikings

Relationships- Annoyed with Ymma

This information should be informed by the text, but brought to life through the research an actor has completed in their preparatory work. So, when an actor is about to rehearse scene one, they

can look at *November 1002 AD at 5:00 PM* and know exactly what the weather would be like, or *a field in Kent* and be able to visualize exactly where they are, or *scared of Viking raids* and know the full consequences of what would happen if they were caught by the Vikings, or *Ymma throws up in the font* and know the religious implications of that action, or *Ymma argues with the King's men* and understand how much power King Ethelred has over their lives. An actor does this research so that when they get to rehearsals, they can look at the circumstances provided in the text and fully understand what is happening in that world, how their character would react, and how high the stakes need to be based on the research they have done.

An actor goes beyond the text of a play to conduct research so that they can create a fully developed character that is believable not only to them as the actor, but also to the audience. "I need to do the research and I need it because I believe that *information breeds instinct*" said actor Henry Goodman. When asked to expand upon that idea, he said "Research liberates the creative instincts: you can't create a performance by reading books about things, but you can get assurance, comfort and support as well as new ideas for instincts that may have to come to you from the script" (Cantrell, Luckhurst 74). The research that an actor conducts prepares them to make informed choices that are consistent with the world of the play. It doesn't matter how much research an actor does if they don't actively apply it to rehearsal. An actor's research will not only inform their choices regarding the character's political, social, and economic status, but it will inform the way they interact with other characters and places, and their reactions to significant events. Adrian Rieder states that:

Research is a fundamental part of the creative choice making process because you will find that the text gives you a lot of clues about who this person is but most of the work you do as an actor is filling in the gaps and filling in the holes and making choices that

aren't explicit in the text. The playwright has given us the bare minimum to convey what's necessary in the story and so as interpretive artists we then take that bare minimum and we flesh it out and make it as specific and nuanced and rich as possible.

(Rieder)

Research helps an actor to root their understanding of the text in a strong sense of the historical period in which the play is set (Mitchell 15), whether that be Medieval England or twenty-first century America. After conducting research, an actor should be able to answer any questions left unclear by the text and thus make informed choices that are consistent with the world of the play.

Rieder goes on to say:

Informed choices are those that aren't explicit within the text that you can point to and say this is how my character thinks or feels about this, but based on the research you've done you can make an informed choice that says I could sit here and you could interview me as my character and I could speak freely and effortlessly about any subject that you wanted me to because I'd done that kind of work. (Rieder)

An actor will learn that there is always more to discover no matter how much research they do, but the more they research, the more prepared they will be for the role.

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